

Going Rogue

Daniel 7:9-14

John 18:33-37

Felix Walker, a Republican Congressman from the Asheville area, didn't mean to go down in history 200 years ago when he made a long, boring and irrelevant speech on the floor of Congress, but because of him and his home place – Buncombe County – mindless nonsense will be forever known as a bunch of bunk.

It was not Pelagius' goal in life to go down in history for having heresy named for him. In fact, most heretics didn't set out to be heretics. But once you wade into the murky waters of divine mystery and try to put words and concrete ideas to something that is basically unfathomable, unknowable, you can expect lots of problems and errors to result. Lots of people, most people, probably, are going to get it wrong. And for the early Christians, trying to understand exactly what it meant to say that Jesus was both divine and human, and what it meant to say that God exists in three persons and yet only be one God, well, there was plenty of room for bad ideas to crop up.

One of those bad ideas is surprisingly palatable, though, the heresy of Modal Monarchianism. It just makes sense to earthbound minds that are trying to make sense of something that isn't earthbound and doesn't make sense, the Trinity. Here is what Modalism says: God does, indeed, exist in three persons, but only one of those persons exists at a time. First, God existed as the creator, then after a spell, became human and lived as Jesus, the Son. Then after his crucifixion he became the Holy Spirit, the 'everywhere' God. Kind of makes sense, doesn't it? Causes less cramping in your brain to think about God that way. But it's wrong. It's heresy.

Now the last thing I want is for seminarians a hundred years from now being taught about this relatively new heresy called Amstutzianism, but what I'm going to suggest is that we have mutated Modal Monarchianism a bit and come up with our own version of it that relates to Jesus. Here's how it goes: Jesus exists in different ways at different times. First, he was with God, then he was a man, and someday, when linear time ends and eternity begins, he'll come back and be the King. In the meantime, he's just up in heaven taking some time off, biding his time, waiting until the end when God puts him back in the game again. Jesus will be King, one day, when the Kingdom of God is finally, firmly established. And I'll be the first to admit we come by that idea honestly – Jesus himself even said to Pilate "my kingdom is not of this world." Okay, so that means it's a different world, a different place – heaven, right? That's sure how it sounds. But it's wrong. It's heresy.

And here's the problem with thinking that way. It leads us to the understandable, but erroneous belief that, for now, Jesus is perfectly content just living in our hearts. If he is King of anything right now, he is king of the individual. Christianity, discipleship, the work of the Church – it's solely about the transformation of the individual heart and life. The whole point and purpose of what we do at church, and what you do in your devotional life is your own personal conversion and sanctification – that's Paul's \$10 word for the ongoing process of growing spiritually. The end purpose is to make you more humble and patient and forgiving, and able to trust God with your life. Internal transformation; that's what it's all about. And there's nothing wrong with

that, as far as it goes. It just doesn't go far enough. It's like saying that the whole point of creating Social Security was to make sure that I had some income when I retire some day.

Now, I'll be the first to admit, it's much easier to accommodate Jesus in our minds in his earthly, sandal-wearing, mom-made-my-robles-for-me, form, than in his crown-wearing, radiant form. As Daniel Clendenin notes, it's easier to think of him as a religious leader – someone wise, compelling, charismatic – than as a political leader – someone with power and authority, someone whose sights are set higher and broader than the rights and privacy and betterment of the individual. But the title is clearly a political one: King. Monarch. Ruler. Someone who is sovereign over a land and all its people.

So here is my question: how would that change things, how would it change us, if we abandoned our quasi-heretical belief, and recognized that Christ was already King? Now. Here. Over everything. The world? Well, for starters, if Jesus is King, that would make us subjects, not just disciples, right? Our allegiance would be to him, first, foremost, before any other. What the king cared about, we would care about. What the king worked for, we would work for. The king's vision would be our vision. The king's hopes and dreams would be our hopes and dreams.

And before I go further, let me just say that I think that being loyal subjects goes far beyond how we vote for our elected officials. I'm sure I'll get some mail and phone calls for this, but nowhere in scripture is it ever implied that we are supposed to set up a Christian nation. In fact, God gave up on the whole theocracy business way back, not long after Solomon. It just doesn't work. Power makes people pretty crazy and greedy, and they usually aren't much interested in sharing it, not even with God. And as long as the agenda of most politicians remains relatively self-serving, or party-serving, then having our kids pray in school or passing legislation on the moral issues of the day aren't going to serve the ultimate purposes of God's kingdom.

So, what does it mean to be the loyal subjects of the King? For starters, it means trying to envision what the world would look like if Christ were on the throne running things. If Jesus was sovereign instead of Obama or Raul Castro or Robert Mugabe or Gordon Brown. It shouldn't be hard. Isaiah imagined it: it would be like having a feast every day, where everyone had plenty of the finest foods to eat, and everyone had his or her own piece of property to live on, and never had to worry about someone coming along and taking it from them. No one would die young from disease or war or starvation. John envisioned it too, from his island of Patmos: there wouldn't be any more sickness, any more tears, any more war or pain or oppression or discrimination. In fact, Jesus spent his whole life trying to describe and show people what his kingdom looks like (not will look like, but does look like): adulterers are forgiven, outcasts are welcomed into the heart of the party, the poor are given not just a place at the dinner table, but the seat of honor.

What do you suppose the world might look like if we took seriously the call to be loyal citizens of that kingdom and didn't just live like it was just a wistful dream of what the world will be like someday? Clendenin envisions a world with 'peace-making instead of war mongering, liberation not exploitation, sacrifice rather than subjugation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity not greed.'

That's a pretty nice vision, isn't it? Of course, people would look at us like we were crazy radicals if we went around living that way, wouldn't they? I have a friend who is pastor of a church that lives like that and everyone in the community refers to them as the liberal hippy church because they visit the prisons and take in homeless people and share their holiday meals together at the church. But that's okay. We'd be in good company; the early Christians were called insurrectionists and seditionists because the way they lived was so radically different from everyone else. It was like they were citizens of another empire, another kingdom, not Rome's. Jesus tried to give us a heads-up, said he came to bring a sword, not peace. Allegiance to Jesus and his kingdom is going to put us at odds with a world that has a very different vision of things than he does. Not someday. Now.

So what are we waiting for? The newsletter for the Johnson City School system came out this week. Did you know that last year there were 380 homeless kids in our public schools? 380. We're less than a mile away from two of those schools, and between all of us here we have about a billion years of education. Why aren't we reaching out to these schools and offering to tutor some of these at-risk kids? Why are our youth programs aimed only at our own kids, kids of privilege?

What are we waiting for? The rest of the world is panicking about money and surviving and having enough. Don't we believe that God has given us our daily bread, and enough left over to provide daily bread for someone else? Why aren't we celebrating the bounty that God has given us instead of holding back and brooding about what we might have to cut out? While I was at the car wash this week, Mitch Albom was being interviewed on the TV and was talking, I think, about a conversation he had with his rabbi about 'the secret' to life: Be content, and be grateful, the rabbi said. That's it. Be content, and be grateful. No one else is. Are we?

What are we waiting for? Christ is King now. His Kingdom is here, now. It's time to live like citizens of that kingdom.